St George of England: a study of sainthood and legend

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Nothing more vividly displays the workings of the Byzantine 'Ministry of Truth' than the extraordinary career - both living and posthumous - of George the Cappadocian.

From the very outset, the triumph of Christianity had been soured by sectarian quarrels. Although the Orthodox Christians were in the habit of calling Constantine 'the equal of the Apostles', they were not always happy about the ideological correctness of his beliefs. During his reign and that of his son, the Arian heresy grew so influential that it came very close to supplanting Orthodoxy as the official sect. Towards the end of his reign, Constantius II became actively embroiled in the controversy, and gave his support to the Arians in their attempt to suppress the 'Orthodox' or 'Catholic' sect. He encountered the strongest opposition in Egypt, where the See of Alexandria was held by the most prominent champion of this sect, Athanasius. So important, indeed, was the part played by this theologian in the controversy that even today the official Christian faith is known as the Athanasian Church, after him. In 356 an order was issued for his arrest, and the bishop only escaped death by taking refuge among the hermits of the desert.

In place of Athanasius, Constantius appointed as Bishop of Alexandria an adventurer called George. This character had a very chequered background. His early transactions as a war profiteer had put him on the wrong side of the law. If this had happened in a less factious period of history, one cannot help concluding that his career would at this point have come to an untimely and inglorious end - and the thousands of people living today who are called George or Georgina would have been christened with a different name. He saved his skin, however, by becoming a fanatical supporter of the favoured Arian sect. It is said that he found his way into the Emperor's favour by bribing the court eunuchs with embezzled Church funds. Once installed as Bishop of Alexandria he set about persecuting Pagans and Orthodox Christians with equal vigour, closing and plundering their temples and churches with the aid of Duke Artemius, the military governor of Egypt, who was another Arian fanatic. The crowning achievement of this team was the pillaging of the Serapium, which was at that time the second largest temple in the Inhabited World. Bishop George was detested by both parties alike. Gregory Nazianzen, a staunch supporter of Athanasius, heaps upon George the same ecclesiastical billingsgate, almost word for word, as he uses in his invectives against the apostate Julian: 'That servant of the Wicked One, that sower of tares, that forerunner of the Antichrist . . . hurricane of unrighteousness . . . corrupter of godliness . . .' etc.

So strong was the Egyptians' hatred of Bishop George, that the moment the country received news of Constantius's death and Julian's succession, an angry mob dragged him out of his church, lynched him, and threw his body into the sea. It is difficult to discover which party was responsible for this crime, since Pagans and Catholics alike took credit for George's death, as a matter of pride. It is quite possible, in fact, that the mob which murdered him was made up of both Pagans and Catholics - united, for once, in a common hatred.

Some time afterwards, however, George's fortunes saw a dramatic change. The Arians, from the start, must have regarded him as a hero of their own sect. About a century later, when this particular controversy had died down, and the Arians began to merge into a united Christian faith, their saints also become absorbed into the orthodox hagiology. In this way 'the odious stranger, disguising every circumstance of time and place, assumed the mask of a martyr, a saint, and a Christian hero; and the infamous George of Cappadocia has been transformed into the renowned St George of England, the patron of arms, of chivalry and of the garter'. (*Decline & Fall*, Ch. XXIII). This is perhaps the most perspicacious - and most mischievous - moment in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. In fact, the evidence for the identification of St George with the Arian Bishop George is very strong. In the official 'Life' of the saint, the death of George is put back about 60 years, to the Great Persecution under Diocletian. Apart from this, the following four 'facts' occur in every version of the legend of St George: (i) he was from Cappadocia (in Eastern Asia Minor); (ii) he was in the Roman army; (iii) he slew dragons; (iv) he died for his faith.

The real-life Bishop George answers the description on all four counts. As for his origins, he was 'a monster from Cappadocia, born on our farthest confines . . . whose blood was not perfectly free, but mongrel, as we know that of mules to be', so his fellow saint Gregory Nazianzen informs us (forgetting for a moment that he was himself a native of the same province); secondly, George had a military background - as a fraudulent purveyor of bacon to the imperial troops; he persecuted pagans (the 'dragon', of course, in normal Early Christian newspeak); and his death was provoked by his own religious fanaticism - even if it was perpetrated by his fellow Christians.

There is another quite surprising corroboration of Gibbon's conjecture in the official Greek Orthodox version of the St George legend. The martyrdom scene follows the conventional pattern: a fire-breathing

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• C Addington died in June 1986, leaving his extensive notes, which have been arranged and amplified by H Foy.

Diocletian heaps upon the martyr one fiendish torture after another, only to be foiled by the divine hand. In frustration, he enlists the aid of a wicked magician called Athanasius, who attempts - also unsuccessfully - to finish off the saint with his poisonous drugs. Since the spiritual and physical conflict between the real-life George and Athanasius - the two rival bishops of Alexandria - was one of the great dramas of the Fourth Century, it is difficult to avoid the conclusions that we are dealing with these very people.

Athanasius was the most vigorous and outspoken of all their opponents, hence the Arian heretics would certainly have regarded him as a wicked magician. The only discrepancy here between fact and legend is that it was Bishop George that persecuted Bishop Athanasius, and not vice versa.

It is most amazing that the Byzantine hagiographers should have allowed these two figures *each* to make two separate appearances into saintly legend, once as a saint and again as a persecuting monster - and under their own names! The reason for this is probably the fact that George and Athanasius have become two of the commonest names among Greek Christians. (In any cafe in Greece you will find at least one Yorgos or Thanasis). But in late Classical times, the Greek words for 'farmer' and 'immortal' were not commonly used as personal names; these two Bishops of Alexandria are the only historical George and Athanasius of this period.

In case this identification of the two Georges should appear too far-fetched, it is possible to provide further circumstantial evidence, in which there is no room for doubt. Throughout these events in Egypt, Bishop George worked in collaboration with the gauleiter-figure Duke Artemius. On Julian's succession, Artemius was arrested, tried, and condemned to death for his atrocities in Egypt. By the Fifth Century, he had become a martyr and a thaumatagist, and he still has an important place in Greek Orthodox hagiology, with his feast-day on 20 October. In his official 'Life', whose origins are thought to go back to the fifth-century writer Philostorgius, the brave, incorruptible Artemius goes through an ordeal of inquisition and torture at the hands of Julian, which differs very little from the tale of St George's martyrdom under Diocletian. His relics became famous for the miracle-cures they performed in ailments of the genitals, especially hernias.

But perhaps the strongest of all support comes from the Vatican itself. In 1968, the Pope struck St George off the official roll of saints, on the grounds that no such person ever existed - the legendary saint on horseback was never anything but a popular myth! The Church was probably wise to sacrifice one of its most popular saints, rather than face the possibility that he was originally a notorious heretic and persecutor of Christians.

St George, according to other sources, was martyred at Diospolis (now Lydda) about the beginning of the 4th century AD. It is uncertain how George of Cappadocia was adopted as the Patron Saint of Britain.

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Editorial footnote

The army of supporters of good St George, by no means reduced to a corporals guard by recent pronouncements, can be encouraged by Baring-Gould.[1] He set the apocryphal accounts against Gibbon's work, and presented concrete evidence in Palestine, Syria and Constantinople of holy George, a soldier, who was martyred at the outbreak of the persecution under Diocletian in AD 285 (date possibly stretched to AD 303), many years before the death of the Arian bishop George in AD 362 (see above).

Some forensic details of the aprocryphal assaults on holy George d. AD 285, revealing his miraculous powers of endurance and recovery may be obtained from Baring-Gould. The torture inflicted on the followers of Athanasius at the behest of Bishop George, and also the account of his death by being torn apart and burned, can be found in Fox's Book of Martyrs[2] which records the terrible suffering by the oppressed, and, sometimes the oppressors (Colo-proctologists should consider the affliction of Caesar Galerius who seems to have reversed his cruel oppressive policy as he entered his terminal illness.)

It is difficult to equate the St George adopted by Venice and Genoa and by Richard I (Lionheart), who may well have visited the shrines to holy George during the crusades, with the Arian George considering the suffering this man inflicted, for example:

'After Whitsuntide, on assembling in the church-yard to pray, during a fast, Georgius employed a Manichee Captain to see on fire a great quantity of faggots, making virgins to stand before it to be roasted, with a view of forcing them to confess the Arian doctrines. On their refusal, he caused them to be stripped naked, and greviously buffetted about the head and face, until they were shockingly disfigured. Forty other persons had their backs and sides scourged with palm twigs fresh taken from the trees, with their pricked knobs, so they were frequently obliged to have recourse to surgeons and others died to their wounds.'[52]

In 1222, 23 years after the death of Lionheart in the reign of young Henry III, the council of Oxford meeting in Osney Abbey fixed St Georges Day 23 April as a national festival. It is said that Edward III made St George the patron saint of England in 1344 (or 48) and in Windsor he enlarged the chapel of St Edward to become the chapel of St George. It is said[3] that at St Georges Day in 1348 at a ball in Calais to celebrate the fall of the town to the English a certain lady dropped a blue garter and the King picked it up and fastened it round his knee. To the taunts of bystanders he replied 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' (The shame be his who thinks ill of it). The lady's garter can be compared with the girdle in the legend.

The legend

George, a tribune, was born in Cappadocia, and came to Libya, to the town called Silene, near which a pond infested by a monster, which had many times driven back an armed host that had come to destroy him. He even approached the walls of the city, and with his exhalations poisoned all who were near. To avoid such visits, he was furnished each day with two sheep, to satisfy his voracity. When the sheep at the disposal of the citizens were exhausted, their sons and daughters were cast to the dragon. The lot fell one day on the Princess. The King covered his child with royal robes and sent her forth to meet the dragon. St George was riding by, and seeing the maiden in tears, and the monster rising from the marsh to devour her, advanced, spear in hand, to meet the monster, commending himself to God. He transfixed the dragon, and then bade the princess pass the [her] girdle round it, and fear nothing. When this was done, the monster followed like a docile hound. When they had brought it into the town, the people fled before it; but George recalled them, bidding them put aside all fear. Then the king and all his people, twenty thousand men, without counting women and children, were baptized, and George smote off the head of the monster.

The legend found its way into the Office-books of the Church, Missals and Breviaries, and it was cut out by Pope Clement VII, and St George was simply acknowledged as a martyr, reigning with Christ. Calvin (1509-1564) apparently was the first to declare his conviction that St George was a myth. Medical historians and cardiologists are remined of a similar 'belt and braces' treatment meted out to Michael Servetus d. (1553)

References

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2 Fox J. *The book of Martyrs (1554m 1563)* (revised and improved by Rev John Malham). London: Kelly, 1811
3 McKisack M. The fourteenth century 1307-1399. In: Clark G, ed. *The Oxford history of England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959